

Preservation Studies and Public Service at Southeast Missouri State University

Academic courses in historic preservation tend to introduce students to an ideal world. Great good can come from learning how things should be done under the best conditions and according to the highest standards. Even greater good can come from the experience of applying preservation principles in real, and sometimes chaotic, situations.

Joshua Headlee, a junior in the Historic Preservation Program at Southeast Missouri State University, helped salvage documents from the burned and flooded Mississippi County Courthouse in Charleston, Missouri. A fire in February 1997 destroyed the roof and severely damaged the interior of the building. Fire suppression and subsequent rains soaked thousands of documents in files and vaults. Archivists from the Missouri Secretary of State's Local Records Program came to Charleston and coordinated an effort to save historical documents.

Students, wearing white lab coats and rubber gloves, hand-dried old record books by interleaving the soaked pages with absorbent paper. Protecting themselves with surgical masks, students also brushed mold from the covers of the heavy volumes. The work was time consuming, exhausting, and seemingly hopeless. Local records archivists loaded many records on a freezer truck and transported them to a facility for vacuum-drying. In the end, archivists, volunteers, and students managed to save most of the historical records from the courthouse.

Mississippi County Courthouse, Charleston, MO, after a fire in February 1997. The building may not be saved, but well over 90% of the records housed in the courthouse were salvaged.



Headlee said the volunteer work enriched him. "Through the experience we had with working at the Mississippi County disaster site, we witnessed the drastic effects of such a disaster. This, if nothing else, will better prepare us in experiencing such disasters of our own in the future. In other words, we now know basically what to expect in a disaster situation—such as lack of funds and supplies—as well as what preservation techniques to employ during such a situation."

In the classroom, students learn skills and concepts that serve them well in real world situations. Jeff Kroke, historian, National Park Service, Ozark National Scenic Riverways, has worked with several interns from the Historic Preservation Program at Southeast. He says his experience working with these undergraduate students has been positive.

One intern, Baird Todd, in the spring of 1996, did the work of a museum technician. He spent the semester living in an old farm house adjacent to the museum curation facility outside Van Buren, Missouri. In museum studies classes, he had learned the basics of museum accessioning and cataloging. According to Kroke, "Baird single-handedly accomplished a cataloging task that would have taken two to three years, because he was able to concentrate on it."

Interns have made a difference in the Riverways, a corridor of NPS property containing pristine springs, an old mill, historic farmsteads, and prehistoric sites. Students have worked in the areas of cultural resource management, archival processing, and museum curation. Kroke, the only staff historian, handles cultural resource management for the Riverways. "One intern," he notes, "doubles my staff."

Working with professionals and receiving on-the-job training enhances the students' education. Kroke treats interns not as cheap labor but as protégés, helping them make the transition from academic training to careers. "What I try to give them," he says, "is an opportunity to apply what they've learned in a real work environment. I share my own experience, but give them independence to make decisions. They should leave here prepared to step into a job."

Catherine Stoverink, a graduate student in the Historic Preservation Program at SMO, interleaves old volumes of tax records with absorbent paper to dry the pages and preserve the information.



Kroke derives personal satisfaction from working with young professionals. "I see them changing and growing, gaining self-confidence," he says. "I watch them becoming more independent, learning to speak up, gaining the ability to make decisions and justify them." The internship experience gives students the chance to attempt new tasks, adjust to new situations, and find out what they really want to do.

In partnership with local, state, and national preservation agencies, Southeast provides opportunities for students to do useful work while learning principles and techniques in their field. As a requirement for the course in Legal and Economic Principles of Preservation, students prepare a draft form nominating a property to the National Register of Historic Places. Steve Mitchell, Missouri's National Register coordinator, reviews these nominations.

"In general," Mitchell says, "the majority of the nominations are just drafts and will not go beyond that stage. About a third of them, though, are solid, well prepared first draft nominations that compare with the work of many consultants. A few of those properties will go on and be listed."

Mitchell is pleased with the students' efforts. "These projects give them valuable experience that has to be a component of any of these courses. It's valuable for students to complete these projects and have them reviewed by our office." The State Historic Preservation Office also benefits. "The students document properties that we believe may be eligible for listing [in the National Register]. We do get information on the properties. The students are adding information to our files whether they're listing the properties or not."

Every spring, preservation students do architectural survey work in Cape Girardeau. Kent Bratton, city planner, says the student surveys are valuable to his office. "As far as Cape Girardeau goes, it's of great assistance. The chances of funding this kind of survey anytime soon are pretty slim."

Bratton has used data from the student surveys in planning for Cape Girardeau's future. "The students give us an overview of the area that helps

us design improvement programs for neighborhoods," he says. "The work done several years ago in the downtown area was used in the Downtown Redevelopment Plan."

Museum studies classes have designed and constructed exhibits at the New Madrid (MO) Historical Museum and the Southeast Missouri State University Museum. These efforts involve drawing floor plans, building dioramas, creating interpretive panels, and writing text. Katie Poyner, a student who worked on the exhibit at the New Madrid museum in spring 1996, said, "We had to do everything—budget, planning, research, and implementation. We had to do it all."

Poyner said the museum project was very hard work, "but in the long run it was very beneficial." The students had to learn to work with the museum's board of directors. "Working with a museum board was a challenge and caused some problems with decision-making." The students created exhibits portraying domestic life and industry, particularly the cotton and timber industries, in the lowlands of southeastern Missouri.

This experience related directly to Poyner's first professional position. After graduating in spring 1997 with the bachelor of science in historic preservation, she began work as a curator of the Delta Cultural Center in Helena, AK. Her work there involves collecting, conserving, and interpreting the material culture of the land bordering the Mississippi River in northeastern Arkansas.

Incorporating real world experiences into academic programs involves both headaches and triumphs. Project work is unpredictable. In spring 1997, two preservation students, Anne Kern and Paul Porter, accepted an assignment to monitor the progress of rehabilitation work on the Social Science Building, the oldest building on the Southeast campus. Unfortunately, problems with lead and asbestos abatement virtually halted the project. Work did not resume until the week before final examinations. Kern and Porter learned more about toxic substances than they did about the repair of cornices and lintels. They also learned valuable lessons about budgeting, adjusting timetables, and coping with the vagaries of fate.

By working side by side with the preservation professionals students have the opportunity to test knowledge and skills they gained in the classroom. They also have the chance to respond to new challenges and begin the process of lifelong learning.

Bonnie Stepenoff is an Assistant Professor of History at Southeast Missouri State University, and teaches historic preservation, historic site administration, women's history, and labor history.

Photos by the author.